DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 278 CE 077 972

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TITLE Certificate of Employability. A Rochester, New York, Case Study--Year 2.
INSTITUTION Rochester City School District, NY.
PUB DATE 1998-10-00
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Competence; *Educational Certificates; *Employment Potential; Experiential Learning; *High School Graduates; High Schools; Informal Assessment; Job Skills; Pilot Projects; *Portfolio Assessment; Program Implementation; School Business Relationship; *Student Certification
IDENTIFIERS *Rochester City School District NY

ABSTRACT

A benchmark program of the Rochester City School District's School-to-Work Transition Initiative created the Certificate of Employability (COE), a supplement to the high school diploma. It verified what students knew through assessment of their academic, citizenship, and attendance records and applied learning skills. In Year 1 (1996-97), the pilot began in three high schools as an option for 12th-grade students. Responsibility of acquiring the COE rested on the student who put together a portfolio. Students were required to present and defend their portfolios showing evidence of skills standards and rated on content and ability to prove achievement of applied learning competencies. At graduation, 54 COEs were awarded. Students reported the COE challenged them, increased ability to be focused, and proved they were competent to obtain employment. In Year 2, more students, educators, and businesses were added. All 9 high schools were included; students in grades 9-12 were eligible. Of about 200 participating seniors, 142 received COEs at graduation. Students felt the COE was valuable and the process allowed them to take pride in their accomplishments. Additional employee sponsors were added for a total of 43. Follow-up of 1996-97 graduates showed that 23 of 54 COE students were employed and 36 were enrolled in postsecondary education. Year 3 activities were to address validation of the COE, staff development, resource allocation/process improvement, and employer sponsorship and involvement. (YLB)

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RBEA

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CERTIFICATE OF EMPLOYABILITY

A Rochester, New York
Case Study - Year 2

By Rochester Business Education Alliance
Rochester City School District

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Introduction

In the early 1980's, local education, business, and community leaders realized that the economic vitality and standard of living of the Rochester community depended on helping all students reach high standards and preparing them for further education and the world of work.

In 1991, the Rochester City School District began its School-To-Work Transition Initiative in response to two reports by the National Center on Education and the Economy, *America's Choice: high wages or low skills!* and *High Expectations: What Rochester Students Should Be Able to Know and Do*. Both reports recommended the creation of a school-to-work transition system that would provide students with academic and work readiness skills.

The intent of Rochester's initiative was to help all young people achieve academic, technical and applied learning skills needed to pursue successful careers. The Rochester plan focused on:

- a curriculum linking school and work
- a support network for students
- technical and professional training
- partnerships with employers
- strategies for public awareness and engagement
- staff development for educators

Rochester's business community had a long history of working with schools and students.

In 1992, the Rochester Business Education Alliance (RBEA) was formed. The RBEA is an employer membership organization consisting of representatives from large, medium and small companies, as well as the Rochester City School District (RCSD)*, county and city government, community colleges and universities, the Metro Chamber of Commerce and the Industrial Management Council. The RBEA works to improve the quality of public education by focusing strategic efforts to improve students' academic performance and better prepare students for the workplace, thus increasing the return on employers' investment in education.

In 1995 Superintendent Clifford Janey formed a Leadership Council composed of leaders from business, education, local government, higher education and the United Way to help him set measurable performance benchmarks for the entire education system. The RBEA, on behalf of the business community, agreed to sponsor and implement benchmark programs.

One benchmark program called for creating a supplemental certificate to the high school diploma. Education and business representatives felt there was an urgency to create a vehicle to assess students' competencies in order to enhance students' academic achievement and employability skills. A design implementation team was formed to determine the needs of businesses and schools. The Certificate of Employability was designed to verify what students know through the assessment of their academic, citizenship and attendance records, and applied learning skills. Rochester's effort is aligned with the national initiative to encourage employers to ask for school transcripts and records in the hiring process. The goal was to complete the initial design and begin piloting the Certificate of Employability (COE) during the 1996-97 school year.

* *The RCSD services more than 37,000 pre-K through 12th grade urban students. Sixty percent of students are African-American, 20% white, 18% Hispanic, and 2% Asian/Native American.*

The Certificate of Employability is Designed To:

- Raise standards and motivate students to excel in school.
- Strengthen the skills of students to enter the workplace directly and/or to pursue post-secondary education.
- Provide employers with clear and concise information about job applicants.
- Provide graduates who obtain the COE with preferential consideration in the labor market.
- Build a pool of qualified workers for employers in the community.

Standards For Achievement of the COE

The student must meet the following criteria before a certificate is awarded:

- Core academic requirements (Minimum of a "C" Grade Point Average)*
  - English (4 units)
  - Math (3 units)
  - Science (2 or 3 units)
  - Social Studies (4 units)
- Achieve 85% attendance **
- Demonstrate achievement of applied learning competencies:
  - Communication
  - Problem solving
  - Working with others
  - Information gathering
  - Learning and self management

* *Higher standards are being phased in, in alignment with New York State and RCSD's efforts to raise standards.*

** *Attendance requirement will be increased to 90% in year 3*

Year One: What Did We Set Out To Do?

Efforts focused on preparing the staff to implement the program, providing support for students, establishing business support, and monitoring assessment tools. The pilot was intended to begin the design, show what works in the implementation process and determine what could be done to improve the process in the future as efforts were made to include all area high school students.

1. Sponsorship Of The COE Initiative

- Sponsorship for the COE required a joint effort between business and education. The RBEA facilitated efforts to gain support of education and business representatives. Sponsorship included: Rochester Business Education Alliance, Rochester City School District - Superintendent and Board of Education, Rochester Teachers Association (RTA), and the Association of Supervisors and Administrators of Rochester (ASAR) and three higher education institutions, including Monroe Community College, University of Rochester, and Rochester Institute of Technology.
- Employers were recruited to sponsor the COE initiative. Sponsorship involves showing public support for the COE, using the COE in hiring practices, encouraging other employers to sponsor the COE and providing job readiness training and experiences to assist schools and students in the COE process. Employers also agree to provide opportunities for COE students to pursue entry level positions upon graduation. Employers have also agreed to collect data on COE students hired to validate that the COE is an effective predictor of success in the workplace.

2. The Design

- The initial process required the establishment of a design team which was chaired by RBEA Program Champion Bob Legge, President of Legge & Company and former vice president of human resources for Sentry Group. His role

consisted of laying out and managing the implementation plan. The Program Champion heads an Implementation Team made up of educators, employers and community representatives that oversees planning, coordination and implementation for the program. Focus groups composed of employers, educators, higher education representatives and students were organized to seek input on the design of the COE. In addition benchmarking studies were conducted to analyze what other communities were doing.

3. The Pilot Implementation

- In the Fall of 1996 the COE pilot began in three high schools: Benjamin Franklin, John Marshall, and Edison Technical. Twelfth grade students had the option to pursue the COE. Students interested in applying for a COE had to submit an application form signed by their parent or guardian in order to participate.

- The responsibility of acquiring the Certificate rests on the student. Students put together a portfolio through the help of adult mentors. The content of the portfolio includes:
  - Cover Page
  - Table of Contents
  - Career Interest Statement
  - Updated Resume
  - Cover Letter Examples
  - Signed Student Application
  - Official Transcript with Academic and Attendance Information
  - Evaluation/Assessment Forms
    - Student Core Academics
    - Applied Learning Skills Assessment Form
    - Student Attendance Summary
    - Citizenship Summary Chart
    - Student Reference Chart

  Optional Portfolio Content
  - Interview Videotape
  - Certificates/Awards/Achievements
  - Writing Samples
  - Senior Projects
  - Technical/Occupational Experiences

- Implementation Teams consisting of representatives from business and education were formed in each school to monitor standards and review the progress of students. A workplan/ timeline was developed with final applications/ portfolios due in mid May and recommendations for the Certificate in mid June. Students were required to present and defend their portfolios showing evidence of skills standards met to a panel composed of education and business representatives. The students were rated on the content of their portfolios and their ability to prove achievement of applied learning competencies. School teams then recommended students for the COE.

- Certificates were issued at graduation in June 1997. Students received paper certificates as well as laminated cards, similar to a library card, noting receipt of the COE.

- WXXI (Public Broadcasting Company in Rochester), with support from the RCSD and RBEA, produced a video describing the COE.

What Did We Accomplish In Year One?

- A total of 54 Certificates were awarded to students (37% of the potential pool of applicants during the pilot phase) at graduation in June 1997. Students reported that the COE challenged them and increased their ability to be focused. Students felt the COE proved that they were competent and worthy to obtain employment. Nearly 30% (16 of 54) expressed interest in full-time employment. The remaining (70%) went on to post-secondary education.

- Students began to understand the importance of high standards and how these standards apply to the world of work.
- More than 30 employers and three higher education institutions agreed to sponsor the COE the first year.
- Recommendations for improvement were articulated by participants to assist in the planning for rollout to all high schools.

What Did We Learn In Year One?

1. More time was needed to prepare students for this effort. Students who start the process in the 9th grade will begin to connect school achievement with success at the workplace. In future years, portfolios with evidence of student work and achievements will begin to be assembled in the 9th grade.

2. Staff development needed to be enhanced in order to gain greater buy-in and involvement.

3. More businesses needed to be involved in this effort to provide a sustaining support network and incentives for students who achieve higher levels of performance.

What Did We Set Out To Do In Year Two?

The challenges of the second year (1997-98) required incorporating more students, educators, and businesses into the program. The program was rolled out to include all nine high schools. Schools were to include 9th through 12th grade students in the COE effort.

1. Sponsorship

- In year two of the COE there continued to be a need for business support and the outreach effort continued to raise employers' awareness of the initiative in order to obtain their sponsorship. Additional businesses signed on, raising the number to 43.

2. The Implementation Process

- RCSD staff met with principals who were new to the COE process to obtain buy-in and support. Schools planned kickoffs to introduce the COE to students.

- RBEA and RCSD created and disseminated new guidebooks for students and business/school teams to assist them in the implementation process.

- COE committees were formed within each school in order to monitor standards, review student work and application information (portfolio).

- A designated person identified as a school coordinator was engaged to monitor the process of the COE. The responsibilities of the school coordinator are:
  - recruiting students
  - organizing steering committee
  - preparing mentors
  - planning inservice for faculty
  - recruiting business partners
  - linking students to worksite opportunities such as job shadowing and work based experiences
  - delivering career workshops
  - assisting students throughout process
  - planning COE exit interviews

- Students worked with mentors from their schools or business sponsors to compile their portfolios to apply for the COE.

- Exit interviews were conducted with graduating seniors. In addition, COE applicants presented their portfolios to a panel of school and business representatives to assess whether student met COE standards.

- Certificates were awarded at graduation with recognition made during the ceremony.

What Did We Accomplish In Year Two?

- Out of approximately 200 participating seniors 142 (71% of the potential pool of applicants) received the Certificates at graduation in June.

- Greater school administrative and staff support in year two has lead to the creation of a specific COE class for 12th grade students scheduled to begin in Fall 1998 at John Marshall High School. Wilson Magnet High School also developed a COE homebase curriculum for 9th through 12th grade students which will start in the Fall 1998. The COE coordinator role is critical to the success of the implementation process. Additional resources for a designated, responsible staff person will be necessary at all schools to ensure that the COE is a priority initiative.

- Students feel the COE is valuable and the process allowed them to take pride in their accomplishments. Although some students felt the process was overwhelming they were pleased with their portfolios. The portfolio is very valuable during the hiring process. One student stated the following: "You will eventually have to complete this process in life so why not do it now." One student received an immediate summer job offer from a business representative during her portfolio presentation and another student was awarded a scholarship from the University of Rochester because of the content of his portfolio. These results validate the commitment of businesses and higher education to provide opportunities for RCSD students who receive the COE.

- Additional employee sponsors were brought on board in year two. Currently there are 43 involved in the COE initiative. They have made a commitment to provide COE graduates with potential entry level jobs. A process to connect graduates interested in employment after graduating has been implemented. Employers have also sponsored jobs for high school students who meet high standards and are on track to achieve the COE. Summer jobs are coordinated through the Mayor's Good Grades Pay Program and are offered as incentives to 9th-12th grade students. Employer feedback regarding students hired has been positive.

- Followup with 1996-97 graduates added additional support to the importance of the COE. According to recent information gathered from 1997 graduates, 23 out of 54 (43%) COE students are currently employed in full or part-time jobs and 36 (67%) are enrolled in postsecondary education. A study of 1997 graduates attending the local community college, Monroe Community College, indicates that 14 COE graduates who were enrolled at MCC in Fall 1998 took higher level Math (75% vs. 40%) and in English (70% vs. 40%) when compared to RCSD graduates enrolled without the COE. COE graduates also had a higher continuation rate to Spring enrollment as opposed to RCSD students who did not receive the COE (85%. vs. 82.2%).

- An Adult Education COE has been designed and a pilot is in process.

What Did We Learn In Year Two?

- Some educators involved with the COE feel the portfolio should be turned in at an earlier time (preferably in December) allowing students the opportunity to use them during job, college, and scholarship interviews. Those involved with the COE felt the paperwork and the point system in the assessment tool needs to be simplified. Future plans are geared towards electronic storing of information. All portfolio information could be placed on computer disks. Students could also post their portfolios on a website allowing businesses to conveniently access information about the student. This will alleviate the bulk of the paperwork and allow greater creativity in the production of the portfolio.

- We need to build younger students' awareness of the COE and define its value so students are motivated to pursue the COE. For optimum implementation of the COE throughout grade levels it is important to understand the psychological and emotional development of adolescents. It has been recommended that a gradual progression of the COE begin in the 9th grade by first emphasizing the relationship of attendance and academics to the world of work.

- We need to increase the number of students attracted to the effort and decrease the attrition rate. In addition to the incentive to obtain a job, young people often need immediate gratification and rewards to reinforce positive behaviors. Creating ways to recognize students with small rewards, such as movie or sports tickets, for meeting various deadlines may help encourage them to complete the COE process. In addition, organized activities involving COE students from all schools could promote allegiance and peer support during the COE process. Finally, students need access to adults who are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the COE process.

- Schools value the importance of this COE. However, there is an overall consensus that greater investment in staff development is needed. More staff would have participated and integrated applied learning skills into their curriculum if they had a greater understanding of the purpose and process of the COE. Staff recognition and incentives can encourage people to support and get involved in the COE process. School people who are responsible for the COE need opportunities for information sharing. Educators and businesses feel this is an important initiative and it needs to be treated as a major priority of the school district.

- Training for employers is also recommended to explain the COE process and the school environment. School felt business had the desire to participate; however, they were often unclear as to what their role should entail. It was suggested that more elaborate training be available for businesses and mentors assigned to work with students.

- The success of the COE depends on school administration and staff support. School coordinators who were not assigned full-time found it difficult to complete the day-to-day tasks of the COE process. Resources need to be made available to schools to complete the implementation work.

- We still need additional employer sponsors. Schools need employers to validate and to reinforce workplace standards and offer assistance and opportunities for students to see worksites. In addition to sponsoring the COE, employers can provide the following: job shadowing opportunities, business speakers, student/teacher tours of business and work-based learning experiences such as internships.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Efforts in the next three years will focus on expanding the number of employer sponsors, increasing the number of COE recipients, continuing to increase the COE requirements to meet RSCD's and New York State's new policies and student performance standards and building public awareness. Eventually rollout of the COE will include all interested schools in the metropolitan area.

The COE design team will focus on completing work in the following four areas this next year:

Validation of The COE

- Evaluation of COE graduates at first year, third year post graduation to assess value and impact of COE. Obtain information/feedback from employers who have hired COE graduates. Continue to collect and analyze data of COE graduates in postsecondary education.

Staff Development

- Staff development for schools to include: history and purpose of the COE, the COE process and ways to integrate applied learning skills within classrooms.
- Introduction of the COE at the elementary and middle school level.
- Incentives to encourage staff involvement and support at the school level.
- Opportunities for those who coordinate the COE to share information.

Resource Allocation/Process Improvement

- Articulate school resource need, i.e., full-time COE coordinator.
- Use technology in the COE process.
- Increase student involvement and decrease attrition rate with incentives and accountability.

Employer Sponsorship and Involvement

- Training specifically geared towards mentors involved with supporting COE students to include: COE history, process, and ways to encourage students.
- Training for businesses who have partnerships with schools to include: awareness of the school environment and culture.

Recommendations For Communities Pursuing The COE

- Form a taskforce composed of business, educators, students, parents and higher education to assess the needs of the community.
- Create a design team led by a champions from business and education.
- Determine criteria for the COE and assessment tools to be used.
- Gain sponsorship from all constituencies in the school district, local government, higher education, and local businesses.
- Determine what resources are available to implement the program into schools and assign resources to this priority initiative.
- Provide staff development for school staff and businesses involved.
- Conduct a pilot with a smaller, more select group of high schools and students.
- Analyze lessons learned in the pilot and improve the process once the pilot is completed. Celebrate successes and address major improvement opportunities.
- Develop a system to track students who graduate with the COE to validate it by collecting information from students and employers.
- Provide continuous support to schools in the implementation process. This support needs to come from employers and the school district.

For further assistance or information, call Donna Phillips, Department of Workforce Preparation, Rochester City School District, at (716) 262-8326 or the Rochester Business Education Alliance at (716) 244-8835 ext. 3042.

This document was produced by LoWan S. Brown, Rochester Business Education Alliance intern, in conjunction with the Rochester Area Career Education Collaborative (RACEC).